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Performing and Deconstructing Whiteness in Student Affairs

Christine Nguyen & Lynda Duran

The student affairs profession upholds whiteness through its practices, policies, and structures. The dynamics of whiteness have a particularly harmful impact on student affairs professionals of color. The authors explore the concept of whiteness in relation to their professional identities and unpack how people of color are encouraged to embody whiteness to fit into the field of student affairs. The authors propose suggestions for naming, understanding, and re-framing how professionals of color engage with whiteness.

More often than not, student affairs professionals of color do not fit. Literally, these pants do not fit. Figuratively, they are actors in a play set in American higher education. From forcing themselves into boxy “professional” clothes to awkward staff meetings, employees of color do not fit. Existing as a faculty or staff of color at a predominantly white institution can trigger a great deal of marginalization wherein individuals may experience a sense of “onlyness” being one of few individuals from their own racial or ethnic background (Harper, 2013). Many professionals also experience role strain (Goode, 1960), microaggressions (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009), and internalized racism (Bivens, 1995; Pyke, 2010). In higher education, employees of color are often expected to embody whiteness as a universal standard of professionalism. When we, the authors (who identify as people of color), step back and look at the way we exist in student affairs, we cannot help but feel a pressure to conform in a way that feels fake. This piece is intended to validate the experiences of professionals of color. This work serves as a clap back, or response, to the unspoken rules that devalue our racial existence as “other,” and that coerce us into adopting white professional standards to fit into the culture of higher education.

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Student affairs professionals of color are faced with constant pressure from external and internal sources to choose how their racial identities impact their professional ones. From each of the author's perspectives, this manifests differently. Lynda, who identifies as Chicana, finds that she embodies whiteness so seamlessly in her professional role that she sometimes does not notice it; whiteness can be invisible. Regardless, Lynda encounters microaggressive instances that remind her that she is brown, and therefore she often feels at odds with the professional status quo in which whiteness is the norm. Christine, who identifies as Asian American, has thought a lot about the extremes of feeling "too much" and "not enough" in her racial identity, and how she has felt pressure to straddle a fine line between the two and never feels absolutely successful at either one.

As a survival mechanism, professionals of color wear a white mask at work, metaphorically bleaching themselves through their behaviors at work to conform to professional standards. The white mask is invisible, plastic, and heavy. The white mask helps them meet professional standards in higher education, yet leaves a chalky residue on their faces that makes them question who they really are at the end of each day. Participating in whiteness is emotionally taxing for people of color (Matias, 2014). The unspoken definition of "professional" is based primarily on a white standard (Page, 2001) - one that is policed by those who embody whiteness in higher education, including people of color as well as white people.

As authors, we invite you, the reader, to think about how you have experienced and continued to encounter whiteness in your workplace. Whether you identify as a professional of color or a white professional, how do you recognize whiteness? How do you collude with and perpetuate it? How do you name and challenge it? How have you adapted to survive and pushed yourself to thrive within a culture of whiteness?

Whiteness Defined

The authors refer to whiteness not as a synonym for white people, but rather as a phenomenon that upholds white supremacy (Picower, 2009). White people and people of color alike can embody whiteness (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Whiteness is an ideology wherein society considers dominant cultural norms as neutral, and anything outside of those standards is "othered" - seen as deviant, strange, or unusual. Whiteness is a social construction and refers to the privilege, power, and influence of certain social, political, economic, and cultural behaviors (Cabrera, 2014; The Critical Media Project, n.d.; Lipsitz, 2006). It is invisible and unearned (Howard, 1999; Jenson 2005). Whiteness is manifested in our workplaces, including but not limited to the following situations:

- when white managers (or people of color embodying whiteness) say "we

don't have a race issue in this office," after being told by employees of color that there is, indeed, a race issue in the office;

- when a certain style of speaking and writing is canonized and all other ways and forms of speaking or writing are not valued and any content communicated using those speaking or writing styles is dismissed outright;
- when numbers and hard data (measurable outcomes) are the most (or only) valued information over storytelling and sharing personal experiences (intangible);
- the valuation of independence and individualism over true collaborative efforts, and staff are given few resources or tools to develop the ability to work collaboratively;
- when white colleagues make claims of "reverse racism";
- when colleagues say they are "colorblind";
- when colleagues accuse professionals of color of "playing the 'race card'";
- when the burden of fixing "diversity issues" is placed on people of color;
- when the workplace ignores the role of white people and white supremacy in creating and perpetuating racially exclusive spaces on campuses;
- _____ (*Readers, fill in the blank. What are some other examples of whiteness you have witnessed or experienced in your work environment? We know there are more examples in addition to what we have offered here.*)

The examples provided demonstrate how whiteness shows up in student affairs workplaces. Whiteness at work results in the dismissal of racial differences and maintains an environment where white folk are comfortable and unchallenged.

It is critical to note that people of color can and frequently do participate in upholding whiteness in the field of higher education and student affairs. The authors have experienced colleagues of color leveraging whiteness to their benefit. Here are some examples of how this manifests among people of color:

- denial that racism exists or not acknowledging its pervasiveness;
- acceptance of white standards as "normal" and expecting people of color to live up to those standards;
- intentionally disassociating themselves from fellow colleagues of color and especially from any solidarity efforts of colleagues of color.

These are ways professionals of color wear the white mask and collude in systemic impacts of whiteness. The authors provide these examples to demonstrate that people of color are not insusceptible to the allure of upholding whiteness in our field, especially since it whiteness itself so often rendered invisible. People of color may demonstrate these behaviors without realizing they are symptomatic

of whiteness in the workplace. They may also knowingly perform these behaviors and elect to prop up this system because they believe they personally benefit from it. The true beneficiary, however, is the institution of whiteness.

Minorities on Display

Sometimes, universities want to use people of color by asking them to pose for photographs in admissions brochures to craft a narrative of “diversity” at an institution. Leonardo (2009) refers to this as the “minority on display.” The university’s communications department may not necessarily be interested in our story, but rather in the story they would like to tell using the skin and bodies of people of color as bait for prospective students, faculty, and staff. The person of color narrative becomes appropriated and repackaged to sell seats in a classroom. Such tokenization of professionals of color serves as an example of what Mills (2007) describes as pervasive ignorance by intentionally furthering a diverse narrative using only amputated parts of people of color. As a result, people of color are reduced to only those amputated parts of self, disregarding the intersectionality and complexity of their humanity. To professionals of color: a university may wish to see and show your skin color in an “urban setting” that it wishes to sell, yet not provide room for the whole story. The whole story might include your experiences with your co-worker, Becky, who recently found out that your family has roots in Mexico and then asked if you got your embroidered shirt there. The rest of that story also includes how you debated with yourself whether to educate Becky about the microaggressive assumptions inherent in her question (that you only buy your clothes from Mexico due to your family heritage), or to simply tell her that you got the shirt at a local department store. It is easier to choose the latter. More often than not, professionals of color automatically and subconsciously suppress their frustration. Suppression as a tool to combat oppression can be a useful yet unhealthy habit in which rage and frustration fester.

Internalized Racism

It can be difficult for a professional of color to identify that they are even wearing a white mask. The mask’s invisibility stems from the cultural hegemony of whiteness in higher education. This hegemony has a significant impact on the professional identities and well-being of professionals of color in higher education. Make no mistake: wearing the white mask is a devastating manifestation of internalized racism. For people of color, the need to fit into the white mold of professionalism often determines their ability to obtain and keep their jobs.

People of color learn to wear the white mask in preparing for job interviews. Indeed, performing in a job interview can involve presenting a polished, inauthentic version of oneself for people of all races. However, unlike white colleagues, a person of color has to negotiate which parts of their racialized selves

get to show up in the interview and workplace due to racial stereotypes about people of color. J. Cole's song "Foldin Clothes" speaks to this negotiations in the lyrics: "Gotta learn to speak in ways that (are) unnatural just to make it through the job interview;" (2016). In this line, Cole describes the disingenuous feeling that comes with performing whiteness in job interviews and highlights the way in which people of color must adopt white mannerisms for professional survival. Professionals of color might wear a white mask to appear hireable without revealing racial characteristics that interviewers might perceive as threatening or otherwise undesirable. This might look like deciding whether to straighten an afro, wear hoop earrings, or show tattoos that have cultural significance. Upon being hired, those same people of color might find it difficult to take off the white mask they initially presented to seem "professional"; they must maintain the facade.

People of color constantly negotiate with themselves about how they present at work. Carbado and Gulati (2013) wrote, "What an outsider says in the workplace can confirm or negate stereotypes of that outsider and make that outsider more or less racially salient," (p. 48). Therefore, professionals of color have to determine when it is safe to express racial and cultural identifiers and whether those characteristics will be either devalued, exoticized, or stereotyped. This double-edged sword means that the way in which professionals of color opt to present themselves has significant implications for their reputation and their working relationships. Show your race on your terms and risk others labeling you as "unprofessional," a coded word meaning "not white enough." A professional of color might take actions as innocuous as joining a staff/faculty race-based affinity group or demonstrating racial or ethnic identity markers through clothing, hairstyle, food in the break room, or artifacts in their office. These behaviors could be construed by colleagues as being overly proud of one's racial identity and lead to professional ostracism, tension in working relationships, critical performance evaluations, or reduced job security or opportunity for advancement.

It is important to note there is a distinction between a professional of color remaining silent because they do not recognize the manifestation of whiteness in a particular situation or because they do recognize it and have made a conscious decision not to risk potential negative consequences of speaking out, such as those listed above. By naming whiteness, higher education and student affairs professionals can begin to distinguish what separates internalized racism from ignorance.

Hope for the Future

This article is not about how to solve racism and eliminate whiteness, but rather a piece that we, the authors, hope might resonate with other student affairs pro-

professionals of color. Professionals of color: Call out your tendencies to propagate whiteness, and give yourself a break when it comes to wearing the white mask. We cannot offer a definitive blueprint to name and battle whiteness in the professional world of higher education, because we know how complex we are as individuals, and how much our narratives and intersectional experiences shape us. The best we can do is invite you to consider the following: be okay with non-resolution, and consider the journey of professional identity development as ongoing. Self-care is critical on this path given the many obstacles that professionals of color face in academia. Among working professionals of color, there is an epidemic of isolation including a severe lack of mentorship (Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999). Such an isolating existence can lead to things like racial battle fatigue (Matias, 2015; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2011), thereby deepening the struggles associated with working in higher education. Professional well-being is especially important given that being overworked is often glorified in student affairs and this work ethic leaves little room for self-defined self-care that fits the unique needs of professionals (Bidner, 2017). It is therefore vital for professionals of color to employ resources that help maintain their overall health and allow space to process the devastating impacts of whiteness.

Find Your People and Tell Your Story

Finding community is one strategy that student affairs professionals of color can use to process the impacts of whiteness. As student affairs professionals of color, the authors have often found themselves surrounded by white people and experiencing pervasive whiteness in our workplaces. We have been fortunate enough to work with institutions that have formal and/or informal staff and faculty groups for people of color. Some institutions have groups that hold space for specific racial or ethnic identity groups, such as an Asian American/Pacific Islander or Latinx affinity group. These affinity spaces can be places of healing, rejuvenation, and kinship to allow us to continue our work and share experiences with others.

Professionals can also find kinship in owning and naming their chameleon-like skills and working together to critique when, where, and how we camouflage ourselves in different contexts. Having the courage to share your experience as a person of color with another person of color in higher education can open the door to a healing space of validation and understanding. Sharing in this fashion can also help professionals of color acknowledge and retain their whole selves, even in compartments. Even if people of color present differently in boardrooms and in affinity groups, each of those expressions of self can be authentic. Further, sharing our stories can lead to impactful practices such as counter-storytelling (Delgado, 1989; Matias, 2015; Solórzano & Yazzo, 2001), which empowers marginalized people by giving voice and value to narratives and experiences

that have been misrepresented in or omitted from research. Counter-storytelling also provides an opportunity for people of color to take agency in reframing the dominant narrative about professionalism and whiteness in student affairs.

Counter-storytelling can invite marginalized folx at universities to share their experiences as students, faculty, and staff and to find community among others who have been similarly marginalized. Professionals of color can take charge of their own narratives and bring to light the true contributions that they bring to a university - one that runs deeper than a brochure could ever portray. This article attempts to retell our story as professionals of color, own how we have participated in whiteness, and highlight the pressures of conforming to white standards. It is a story of resilience, emphasizing the complex social skills involved in examining how whiteness invites folx to compromise themselves. The authors find that sharing our true experiences of racism and isolation in higher education has allowed us to work toward healing, and grant forgiveness to ourselves when we realize we have worn the white mask. At an individual level, a professional of color may find validation through counter-storytelling. In addition, counter-storytelling by professionals and students of color can challenge the cultural hegemony that dominates institutions of higher education by bringing attention to voices that might otherwise be ignored or silenced.

Having hope for the future means we believe all student affairs professionals are capable of self-awareness and change. For professionals of color, that change starts with the courage to take off the white mask, look in the mirror, and acknowledge the complexity and brilliance of being a person of color in higher education.

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